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STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF, AND H

H PLEASE PASS TO FRANK JANUZZI IN OFFICE OF SENATOR BIDEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV VM EMIN HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: STAFFDEL JANUZZI MEETINGS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Reftels: A) HCMC 622; B) Hanoi 712; C) Hanoi 1987

1. (SBU) Summary: During meetings with Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff member Frank Januzzi in Hanoi on September 1, a Catholic Church leader and a GVN Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) official depicted a steadily improving situation for religious believers in Vietnam. Of note, the Catholic Church is increasing the number of seminarians studying in Hanoi this year, and hopes to expand charitable activities when the new Ordinance on Religion comes into effect on November 15. The CRA official said that the process of opening new churches in the Central Highlands was continuing without interruption, and that seven new Protestant churches would be recognized by the end of 2004. Mr. Januzzi's other meetings in Hanoi and visit to Gia Lai province will be reported septel. End Summary

2. (SBU) Bishop Ngo Quang Kiet, Apostolic Administrator of the Hanoi Archdiocese and Bishop of Lang Son diocese, told Mr. Januzzi that religious freedom is "evolving" in Vietnam, and noted "ten years ago we couldn't have had this meeting." Similarly, he explained that a decade ago, ordaining new Catholic bishops in Vietnam was "very difficult," but now all dioceses had bishops. Bishop Kiet said that more Catholic churches were being built in both northern and southern Vietnam, and that Church activities were "diversifying." For example, he cited that 5000 young Catholics had participated in a church retreat in Hanoi just two weeks before. He also pointed out that Catholic bishops now had no difficulty traveling to the Vatican. In fact, the entire Vietnam Bishops Council had visited Rome two years ago, and Bishop Kiet would leave for his fourth trip to Rome in five years this weekend. Bishop Kiet credited these changes to "improved policies" by the GVN. Nonetheless, Kiet noted that "religious activities are easier to carry out in the south than in the north, in urban areas rather than in rural areas, and are still difficult in the mountains."

3. (SBU) Bishop Kiet particularly stressed that the Church had recently been allowed to recruit more seminarians to study in Hanoi. In the past, he said, the Hanoi seminary had only been allowed 45-50 students entering once every two years. In this fall's new class, however, there would be 90 new students. [Note: Restrictions on the number of seminarians has been a point of particular frustration for the Catholic Church in Vietnam. In addition to numerical caps, seminarians must be approved by relevant GVN agencies before they begin their studies, and again before they are ordained. End note]

4. (SBU) Bishop Kiet also discussed the Church's charitable activities. Until now, he said, such activities had been done through Church participation in state-run programs, through independent activities that had explicit approval by authorities, or through "secretive activities." For example, he noted that last year in HCMC, when the GVN found itself unable to cope with the number of new HIV positive patients "in their final stages," it called upon the Catholic Church for assistance. The Church provided 150 religious workers to assist. (ref. A) "We have long proposed that the government allow us to conduct more activities in educational and social affairs," Kiet explained, adding that the Church was generally restricted only to supporting kindergartens. He said that the Church thought "it is our responsibility to society" to operate charitable schools and health care centers, and wanted "the independence to do so." Bishop Kiet acknowledged that Vietnam's new Ordinance on Religion - which would take effect November 15 - made mention of charitable activities by religious groups, but said "we are not sure" if the ordinance would allow the Church the freedom of activity it sought.

5. (U) Nguyen Thanh Xuan, Deputy Chairman of the GVN's Committee for Religious Affairs, focused largely on religion in the Central Highlands, in advance of Mr. Januzzi's trip to the region the following day (septel). Xuan said that Protestantism had first come to the Highlands in the 1930's, that there were 60,000 Protestant believers there in 1975,

and over 100,000 today. [Note: Mission figures put the number at 350,000. End note.] He said that the "normalization" of the situation for Protestants in the Central Highlands began with the recognition of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in 2001, and pointed out that four highlands ministers now sat on the SECV's board and students from the region were enrolled at the SECV's seminary in HCMC. This process continued with the decree on normalization of relations with the SECV, issued in November 2003 (ref. B), and was aimed at putting SECV activities in the Central Highlands on the same basis as in all other parts of Vietnam. "The Central Highlands," he said, "have been given high priority" and the process of normalization continued unabated. [Note: This differs with comments of CRA Chairman Thi, who told Ambassador Hanford in June that the normalization process has been suspended as a result of unrest in the Central Highlands in April. End note.]

16. (U) Specifically, Xuan said that seven new Protestant churches would be officially recognized in Gia Lai province before the end of 2004. He did not comment on possible new churches in other highlands provinces. Xuan noted that there was still a shortage of pastors in the region, but said that the CRA was planning to help the SECV's seminary in HCMC "increase its capacity" and was continuing with plans to carry out "on site training" in the Central Highlands next year. This would involve uncertified religious leaders receiving instruction from teachers from HCMC. He added that the CRA had suggested to the SECV that it send students to study abroad. In the meanwhile, Xuan said that Protestant villages should register the number of Protestant believers, the name of their church leaders, and the schedule and location of their religious activities. Those village congregations that did not meet all the criteria for recognition could operate as "satellites" of larger, officially recognized congregations, he said. "When a village has its own pastor, it can separate and establish an independent congregation," he added.

17. (U) Mr. Januzzi brought up the new Ordinance on Religion, and noted that many in Washington were disappointed that it did not contain specific language banning forced renunciations (ref C). Xuan replied that the ordinance was a "framework," and that it still remained for the GVN to draft "implementing documents," which would be more specific. "We understand that (forced renunciations) exist in some areas, but they are the result of individual actions," he said. He described forced renunciations as a "psychological matter," the reaction when people with long-held traditional beliefs were suddenly confronted with "new phenomena." Nonetheless, "the new ordinance will overwhelm such actions," Xuan promised. He added that the creation of a single code to govern religion would have "significant legal effect and significant unifying effect" and would make the practice of religion "equal for all of Vietnam."

18. (SBU) Comment: Xuan's comments were some of the most positive news we have heard on religion in Vietnam in some time. So positive, in fact, that we fear he may have been just telling his Congressional visitor what he wanted to hear. Mission will monitor the situation in the highlands to see if the "normalization process" for the SECV has indeed resumed, and if new churches will open as promised. End comment.

19. (U) Mr. Januzzi has not cleared this cable.  
BURGHARDT